

April 20, 2019

Dear House Labor and Commerce Committee Members,

I'm submitting my written testimony as a member of the public in support of HB 24. I grew up in Fairbanks and have background in education and specific interest in bilingual education as well as language revitalization. I left Alaska to attend Dartmouth College and later got a masters in education equity with focus on bilingual education at the CU Boulder. Last year I worked for the Anchorage School District, Title VI Indian Education Office coordinating Project Ki'L which is an afterschool program serving over 200 Alaska Native youth in 6 schools. I worked every day to support the academic success of these at-risk students because male Alaska Native students specifically face the highest drop out rates and lowest academic achievement of any demographic our district serves. I support HB 24 because I know that for indigenous youth, learning a heritage language can support not just academic achievement but also better mental and physical health outcomes, including a dramatic decrease in suicide and diabetes rates.

Knowing multiple languages further prepares graduates from Alaskan schools to be highly competitive in an increasingly global job market. Dual language immersion programs, which teach content in both English and the target language, are widely regarded as the most effective way to reach fluency in a second language and additionally benefit students' academic performance in English and overall learning outcomes. For example, students from immersion programs demonstrate higher academic achievement in English as measured by standardized tests, ACT and SAT scores, and academic performance in college. It's worth noting, second language instruction had the highest effect on scores in the ACT's English subsection. Specific skills that students learning a second language improve on include reading comprehension, language mechanics, and language expression, and the ability to think divergently. Students also demonstrate stronger word knowledge, spelling, math computation, and math problem solving. This is because students transfer skills between the languages they learn.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this bill would address the critical shortage of teachers and enable districts to hire the most qualified individuals to best serve our students by providing schools with flexibility necessary to staff immersion schools with effective teachers. A lack of certified teachers is a crucial barrier for many of Alaska's existing and proposed immersion programs. HB 24 would allow school boards to hire teachers they deem the most qualified for immersion programs, through an individualized vetting process. This bill provides important de-regulation and opportunities for increased local control by enabling school districts to hire talented teachers on a case by case basis. Alaska already has a shortage of teacher applicants and finding certified teachers who can teach content in another language can be prohibitively difficult. This bill widens the hiring pool and enables immersion schools to fill vacancies, that sometimes for lack of other options are staffed with subs who don't even speak the target language, with skilled individuals.

I personally understand how long it takes to become proficient in another language and have been studying Spanish since middle school, and while I'm conversational, I wish I had had the opportunity to study in an immersion program to gain true fluency. For all these reasons and more I encourage you to strongly support HB 24.

Sincerely,  
Margi Dashevsky